

Resources seek to spawn citizen science on caribou

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The Foothills Research Institute are hoping some newly released resources will foster more awareness of challenged caribou populations in the region.

Better yet, it is hoped the resources will help engage those out in the wilderness to help monitor and track caribou herds.

"One of our main goals was outreach and education. We visited schools and presented to a total of 700 students in Hinton and Grande Cache, and we're setting up talks with industry during safety meetings as well," said Fran Hanington, communications and extension assistant with Foothills Research Institute (FRI). "That's what's going to save caribou – citizen science."

Caribou Patrol Edukits have been created with different information targeted toward three specific demographics – students in schools, industry and the general public. Signage has also been posted in various tourist information kiosks.

The industry kit, for example, provides different strategies for

identifying caribou in the bush – like pictures to help differentiate their look and their tracks from other common ungulates.

"Industry is out there on the ground and it's important to have their help in getting data on sightings," Hanington said, adding that people can report sightings on the Caribou Patrol Program Facebook page. "We are starting to get a lot of action with some really good uptake from the public."

There are four woodland caribou herds in the greater region, and all are considered threatened. The two in the vicinity of Hinton – the Little Smoky and A La Pêche herds – are located between here and Grande Cache. Both herds have seen a downward population trend. The Little Smoky herd numbers were 78 when last counted in 2011 and the A La Pêche herd stood at 88 in 2012.

"Our herds are getting to the tipping point. Once they get to that point it's hard to bring them back from the brink," said Hanington.

Those interested in learning more can check out the Caribou Patrol Program on Facebook or download an edukit by visiting www.cariboupatrol.ca.